

PRINCIPLES FOR THE WORDS OF HYMNS

Adopted by the Department of Hymnody, September 1985, to provide guidelines for the preparation of the Supplement to Lutheran Hymnal. This statement is an elaboration of 'General Principles for New Australian Lutheran Hymnal', adopted 1951 or 1952, under 'The Hymns'.

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'Hymns must be doctrinally sound, must have real value for devotion and worship; whether originally written in English or translated, they must be linguistically and poetically good; all hymns must measure up to the standard of good hymnody.'

1 Hymns must be doctrinally sound

- Hymns must be soundly gospel-centred, not moralistic, legalistic, or triumphalistic.
- A single hymn cannot say everything, cannot present the whole of Christian teaching, but overall it should not be a distortion of the Christian message.
- Hymns should be catholic and ecumenical in thrust, not sectarian or individualistic.
- They must be faithful to Scripture in content, and also, to a certain degree, in imagery. (Scriptural imagery may be extended or re-expressed, but should not be completely rejected or lost sight of.)
- They should be God-centred rather than human-centred. The primary aim should be to confess God's worth, and not merely to express the writer's creative urge or even to teach the writer's ideas.
- A hymn must say something, and not just be an expression of a warm 'religious' feeling. There should be proclamation, praise, and confession.
- There should be a balance between traditional emphases and present needs and concerns and ways of seeing things.

2 Hymns must be valuable for devotion and worship

- Hymns should be an avenue for the expression of the faith of the whole community of believers, not just personal or trendy ideas or feelings.
- They should combine objective corporate Christian truth with the subjective experience and expression of faith of the individual believers. They should not be only a recitation of facts nor merely an expression of religious feeling.
- The feelings and moods expressed should be appropriate to the content; they should be a response to God and his word: eg humility and penitence in the face of his majesty and law; thankfulness and joy arising out of the gospel message.
- Hymns should express clarity and certainty of faith (which does not preclude expressions of Christian struggle and difficulty).

- In its expression, a hymn should have newness, freshness, and integrity, and not just be a mechanical repetition of things that have been said before.
- There should be unity of form and content.
- A hymn should be understandable, but not trivial or simplistic. Enough should be clear at first singing for ordinary people to grasp the essential meaning, but there should also be enough depth to enable the hymn to be used over and over and grow in meaning.
- Generally there should be a single theme, organic unity, and a definite progression. A hymn should not be overloaded by attempting to say too much.

3 Hymns must be linguistically and poetically good

- The language must be clear, free from obscurity or ambiguity, not too subtle or complicated, yet not simplistic or banal.
- The hymn should show consistency in mastery of the artistic expression and control over the chosen form — the proper metre, rhyme, and structure.
- The style should not be artificial or over-formal, nor slangy or colloquial. It should be consistent, controlled, and modest, not outrageous or unintentionally funny.
- The words should be appropriate, with the right words in the right places. No particular words or expressions should stand out by being archaic, neologistic, ‘poetic’ or clichéd.
- The sounds of the words must also be appropriate. The words should not depend, for clarity of understanding, on visual devices such as capitalisation or punctuation. They should be singable and not jarring. Features such as alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, rhyme, and rhythm should be controlled.
- Hymns should contain strong, clear, consistent, and appropriate imagery. The imagery should not be flowery, far-fetched, or obscure, and there must be no mixed metaphors.
- In keeping with modern English style, sentence inversions and complicated sentence structures should be avoided as much as possible; verbs used in preference to abstract nouns when describing actions; the active voice in preference to the passive; the specific and concrete to the abstract.
- A minimum of theological jargon should be used.
- ‘You’ not ‘thou/thee’ should be used in addressing God.
- Where possible, terms which are sexist or which may offend groups of people, or which have acquired unfortunate connotations, should be avoided.
- Archaic poetic abbreviations, such as ‘o’er’, ‘‘tis’, should be avoided. Restrained use may be made of common contractions such as ‘it’s’, ‘he’s’ where appropriate.

Note: See also Statement 6, ‘Guidelines for modern English in hymns’.